

SHEEP, THEIR TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS.

NO. VIII.

FINE WOOL—SAXON MERINO.

It is not a matter for wonder that in the hands of so painstaking and intelligent breeders as those of Germany, whose attention was early attracted to the Merinos of Spain, that this susceptible animal should soon assume a distinctive type, and a high order of excellence. Several of the German states, as well as their neighbor Hungary, possess flocks upon which have been bestowed every effort at improvement that was within reach of science or wealth.

In 1765 the Elector of Saxony, Augustus Frederick, by permission of the Spanish authorities, imported into his own country 300 Merinos—about 100 rams and 200 ewes, mostly Escurials—placed most of them upon his private estate, and afforded for their improvement every facility within reach of law and personal effort. A commission was appointed to look after the management of the highly esteemed flock, and every possible means used to bring the excellencies of the newly acquired Merinos to the favorable attention of Saxon breeders. It was not, however, until the expiration of several years, and after experiences with the Spanish stock that in some instances was compulsory, that the prejudice against innovation upon the traditions and practices of their ancestors, characteristic of most peoples, was so far overcome as to insure the newcomers a welcome to the sheep folds of their adopted home. When the value of the new acquisition began to be appreciated, and the reaction in their favor fairly set in, so great was the demand for rams that to partially meet it a new importation was determined upon. Accordingly, in 1777, an envoy was dispatched to Spain, commissioned to purchase 300 animals, in which he was but partially successful—returning with 110, pronounced superior to the animals of the first importation. Other breeding establishments were at once founded and stocked with these animals, schools for the education of shepherds were established. The commission before mentioned was active in disseminating

among the people information as to the importance of sheep culture and the details of its successful prosecution. In some instances the royal tenants were required to become the owners of a certain number of sheep—and there was laid the foundation of a peculiar fine-wool industry that has since widened into world-wide celebrity, and has made a lasting impression upon the husbandry and wool manufacture, not alone of Europe, but the civilized world as well.

As evidence of the exceeding care with which selections of rams destined for use in improving the Saxon flocks were made, Youatt quotes a letter from a breeder detailing the process of determining the fleece merits of individual animals, viz: “— when the lambs are weaved, each in his turn is placed upon a table, that his wool and form may be minutely observed. The finest are selected for breeding, and receive a *first* mark. When they are one year old, and prior to shearing them, another examination of those previously marked takes place; those in which no defect can be found receive a *second* mark, and the rest are condemned. A few months after they in like manner receive a *third* mark, when the slightest blemish causes a rejection of the animal.”

From the first, the efforts of those directing the management of the Merino in Saxony, seem concentrated upon the refinement of fleece. This was rapidly secured, though not without the sacrifice of certain attributes for which the animals were most highly esteemed in their native country. The hardiness for which the Spanish Merinos were conspicuous, would seem to have been almost entirely eliminated, from the accounts of the routine management of the most highly-prized flocks, which required dainty housing and dainty food to which the “hot house” animals of this and other countries are strangers. One account, given by a prominent herder, says, after enforcing the necessity of housing every night, “even in summer, except in the very finest weather,” until the dew is off the grass, that “if they are permitted to eat wet grass, or exposed frequently to rain, they disappear by hundreds with consumption.” The most careful attention was bestowed during the lambing period. The ewes and young lambs were placed in a pen by themselves, and remained thus until the latter was old enough to travel to the pasture, the while being tempted to eat by such dainty morsels as could be found for it.

Under the enervating influence of such a treatment through a period of sixty years, the Saxon Merinos, in 1824, the date of their introduction into the United States, were poorly calculated to endure the exposure and privations that awaited them this side of the Atlantic; and any other result than that which befell the attempts to engraft their characteristics upon American fine-wool flocks, might properly have been esteemed little short of miraculous. A large proportion of the animals included in these importations, according to contemporaneous evidence, were impurely bred—high grades picked from such flocks as had an annual surplus for market; which found its readiest pur-

chasers among those supplying the “fevered” American demand for Saxon sheep. Here the fact of importation became the passport into folds that afterwards went down in the general disaster that overtook, with few exceptions, the fine-wool industry of the United States. Men who had been identified with the importation and improvement of the Spanish Merino, yielded to the “craze,” and crossed upon their flocks the light-fleeced favorites of the hour. A few breeders saw the mistake into which they, in common with others, had fallen, in time to rescue a portion of the flock from the general maelstrom which so nearly engulfed the descendants of Spanish Merinos in America; and to this fact is the country indebted for the American Merino of today.

As in the Saxon Merino, everything was sacrificed to the texture of fleece; the weight of fleece was considerably reduced. This fact, coupled with the deteriorating influence of the cross upon the standard of hardiness, which was a recognized necessity to successful sheep husbandry in America, soon made evident the policy of eliminating the Saxon blood, and now for more than forty years the tendency from that type and blood has been as rapid and direct as breeders could make it. Saxon blood is claimed as remaining pure in a few flocks, but the individual animals composing these flocks bear little resemblance to their ancestors which lorded the sheep walks of fifty years ago. The fleece has been Americanized; though fine, the fibre is lengthened and the weight greatly increased; while the carcass is equally improved. This animal commends itself to breeders who aspire to the production of a superfine wool, for which the tendencies of fashion will, ere long, create a demand; and this, probably, in advance of the ability of the breeders of American Merinos to supply. This class of breeders will, however, be limited; and the man need not be much of a prophet to discern that the day of popularity for the Saxon type of Merino among American breeders is altogether a thing of the past.